

## **Corruption: Obasanjo's toughest challenge**

**Eniwoke Ibagere**

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The anti-corruption group Transparency International last year rated Nigeria as the 27th most corrupt country in the world.

Even patriotic Nigerians will tell you their country should have been among the top 10.

Corruption and cronyism have long haunted Nigeria - the society is an emblem of crass materialism, the leaders famous for financial excesses, and the public service a symbol of graft.

Since assuming office last year, President Olusegun Obasanjo, with his reputation for being incorruptible intact, has tried to keep to his promise of stamping out corruption.

### **'No sacred cows'**

"For corruption, Transparency International awarded us the World Cup...for me I'm aiming put an end to corruption in Nigeria and there will be no sacred cows," Mr Obasanjo said, in a speech he broadcast to the nation as part of celebrations to mark the first anniversary of democracy.

He began his crackdown on corruption with the army, sweeping into retirement all officers who had held political appointments when the army was in power.

Then came the Anti-Corruption Bill, the first he sent to the Parliament, aimed at probing the financial excesses of officials and civil servants.

But most MPs were averse to the bill, while others thought Mr Obasanjo should go further, removing the immunity enjoyed by the president, his deputy and the regional state governors.

### **Everyone tainted?**

"I think Obasanjo will have problems with the Anti-Corruption Bill because scores of Nigerian public officers, that is ministers, heads of the government agencies, parliamentarians, and even the President himself will be trapped," said Lagos resident Donald Imosemi.

"All of them have skeletons in their cupboards."

Meanwhile, an anti-corruption panel, inaugurated by Mr Obasanjo last year and headed by industrialist Christopher Kolade, recommended the cancellation of more

than \$1bn worth of contracts, awarded between January and May 1999 by the last military regime led by General Abdulsalami Abubakar.

"A number of the contracts were cancelled outright while some others had their value scaled down after renegotiations," said a spokesman for the Contracts and Appointments Review Panel.

### **Oil concessions**

Mr Obasanjo then upheld the revocation of licences for crude oil concessions awarded in the dying days of the military, as recommended by the panel. Nigeria earns more than 95% percent of its foreign exchange from crude exports.

The president cancelled national honours bestowed by General Abubakar on himself and 750 other Nigerians, many of them former military officers.

His government is also struggling hard to recover several millions of dollars, looted from the national treasury by past military officers, stashed away in foreign banks.

The military may not be pleased with Obasanjo, but few Nigerians are unhappy with his approach.

### **Accounts laid bare**

Tunji Braitwaite, a vocal critic of previous army governments, warns however that Obasanjo cannot afford to cut loose from the military.

"He hasn't initiated any legal cases against those, particularly the army leaders, suspected of stealing billions of money."

In the fight for transparency and openness, the Obasanjo government cancelled the GSM mobile phone contract, citing irregularities in the bidding process, and fired top officials in the state-run phone company NITEL.

A few days before Nigeria's first anniversary of democracy, the state-owned oil company NNPC laid open its public accounts - hitherto seen as state secret but more often exploited for wide-scale corruption.

### **'Rotten to the core'**

The creditors had demanded transparency in the oil sector as a condition for debt forgiveness for Nigeria, groaning under a debt portfolio of around \$30bn.

In a television interview recently, Obasanjo proudly said he had "achieved a lot" in the anti-corruption war.

"Most of our organisations are rotten to the core, from the top to the bottom. But I can say I have made significant changes since mounting the saddle."

MPs accuse the president of bloating the budget with requests for perks, such as \$78 million for a new presidential jet and for making several foreign trips with a large entourage.

Mr Obasanjo has hit back by accusing some MPs of using their position to sell government contracts to the highest bidder.

Nigerians point to the corruption and inefficiency that continue to dog NITEL, electricity company NEPA, the Nigerian Police Force and other government agencies.

"Getting your phones installed, you have to give out bribes," says economist George Aweh.

"To get a passport, the officials demand some money. The police are an embodiment of corruption and graft as they mount check points and extort money from law-abiding motorists and citizens.

"Unless something drastic is done," he concludes, "then Obasanjo would have achieved nothing."